





# PAL DOGS

## Does Your Dog Need a BFF?

By Barbara Smuts, PhD, and Camille Ward, PhD



**As we walk along the wooded trail, Sage, a one-year-old male German Shepherd, uses a neck bite to push Sam, a four-month-old Labradoodle, to the ground. Sam jumps toward Sage, who once again flings the pup to the ground. Sam lies on his back wildly kicking his legs in the air while Sage bites down on Sam's neck and growls. Sam finally wriggles free, only to be pinned again a few seconds later. Sam and Sage repeat this pattern of interaction over and over for about ten minutes, until we realize that if they keep it up, we will finish the two-mile loop around midnight. We need a quick solution, so we let Sage carry a tennis ball—his favorite thing in the world. Eureka! It seems to work, except for one glitch. Sam keeps running after Sage and leaping on him as if to say, “Leave that ball alone and come play with me!”**

Photography by Amanda Jones



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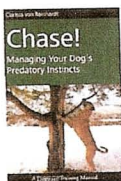
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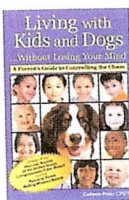
Almost every dog has some degree of prey drive—it's in his genes—some more than others. Instead of using

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Sam and Sage are friends—best friends, in fact. Although it might strike some as anthropomorphic to describe their relationship in these terms, scientists have been documenting friendships in wild animals for over 30 years. First described in nonhuman primates, friendships have now been reported in a wide variety of mammals, ranging from giraffes to bottlenose dolphins. Friends are defined as individuals who, by choice, spend a lot of time near each other and frequently engage in friendly behaviors. Behaviors vary by species: Baboon friends groom a lot, bonobo friends have recreational sex, female dolphin friends "hold fins" as they swim together, and dog friends tend to play.

Over the past decade, we and our colleagues have been collecting video data of dogs interacting with each other. We have filmed hundreds of hours of adult dogs, juveniles and puppies at dog parks, on walks and in backyards and living rooms, including our own. We code these tapes frame by frame in order to scientifically address questions about play and other social behaviors in dogs (findings to be discussed in future articles). Along the way, we have documented, on tape and in notes, a number of striking canine friendships.

The relationship between Sage and Sam illustrates several important features of dog friendships. To begin with, canine friendships, by definition, are mutually preferred and jointly constituted. Sam was a puppy when he first met Sage on that walk five years ago. Since then, Sage and Sam have been exposed to many dogs, and a few of them have become friends of one or the other, but their relationship remains very special—and it was special right from the start. Not many dogs can take Sage's rough play style, and to some outsiders it might seem like Sage is bullying Sam, but Sam relishes it and is fully complicit in their lopsided play pattern.

We have noticed that close canine friends often play roughly and develop idiosyncratic games. For example, Safi

and Osa (female German Shepherd and male mixed-breed who were best friends for five years) often chased each other through the woods until they ended up on opposite sides of some huge log. Then, facing each other, they would bark back and forth as loudly as possible, interspersing the barks with nasty, lip-curling snarls. After 20-30 seconds, one would leap over the log toward the other and the chase was on again.

To a naïve observer, the play of good friends might look or sound like mortal combat. In reality, their wild games reflect how comfortable they are letting go with each other.

The Sage/Sam and Safi/Osa relationships clearly have important benefits for the dogs and also for us. The friends don't live together, but they often visit each other's homes. This can offer a great alternative to a kennel or leaving a dog home alone all day. While together, they tire each other out and stimulate each other's bodies and minds. At the end of the day, living with a dog who has some of his social, physical and mental needs met is easier and much more fun.

These benefits can be real for any two dogs who enjoy each other's company, but dog friendships offer something above and beyond the play factor. For one thing, friends seem especially likely to come to each other's aid when in trouble. For example, we were at a park when another dog approached us. The dog, a medium-sized mix, charged toward Sage and barked in his face. Sage turned and walked away, so the newcomer turned his attention toward Sam—first barking and then growling at him. These were not play growls. In an instant, Sage ran over and placed himself directly in front of Sam and faced the newcomer. Sage barked and walked toward him. The other dog moved back, and then took off in response to a call from a distance. Although it all happened very quickly, it was clear that Sage had supported his friend. Over the years there have been several similar incidents in which the bolder dog, Sage, supported the less



assertive Sam during conflicts with other dogs.

Or take Bahati, a dingo-like female who is friends with Tex, a light-brown male sporting a black mask. Tex's human friend, Tyson, was trying to help Tex overcome his fear of deep water. Standing on a dock with Tex in his arms, Tyson slowly lowered him into the water while Bahati watched from shore. Although the water was shallow enough for Tex to stand in, he panicked, paws flailing wildly. Before Tyson had a chance to do anything, Bahati sped up the dock and leaped into the water beside Tex. A strong swimmer, she immediately headed toward the shore, and a reassured Tex swam alongside her.


Although neither Sage's defense of his friend nor Tex's panic were life-threatening situations, consider a video that hundreds of thousands of people have watched on Youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgWUel3AHrs>). Cars and trucks were speeding along a freeway in Santiago, Chile, while a routine surveillance camera automatically filmed the scene. A stray dog was hit by a truck and lay injured on the road. Seconds later, another stray braved the speeding cars to cross several lanes to reach the other dog. Then this rescuer dragged the wounded dog backward, using forepaws, until they safely reached the edge of the road. Clearly, dogs enter the world primed to care about and for others, whether canine or human.

Friends can provide much-needed stability when change threatens a dog's equilibrium. After Sage's two canine housemates died within two weeks, he lost interest in going for walks, eating and training. It was clear that he was in mourning. People, when grieving, get solace by talking about their loss and spending time with close friends and family, but what's a dog to do? Sage couldn't exactly pick up the phone and share his feelings with Sam, but with our help he could visit his buddy. Sage began to spend several hours at Sam's house a couple of times a week, and after each visit he seemed transformed. He would return home with his big,

open-mouth smile, which always made us smile too; he would eat that evening and he seemed happier. As the visits continued, Sage slowly came back to life and, thanks to Sam, before long he was his old self again.

The fact that Sam, not we, could draw Sage out of his black hole indicates that dogs can give each other something we cannot. In particular, we can never chase and tackle the way another dog can, and we don't speak their language. This raises an important question: If our dogs have canine best friends, does this detract from our relationships with them? In our experience, the answer is a definite "no." Although our dogs routinely play and hang out with their canine friends, they still seek us out and adore our company as much as ever. We spend one-on-one quality time with each of our dogs, whether we're having fun in agility, teaching new tricks, or playing hide-and-seek. It doesn't have to be one or the other. Dogs can have dog friends and still be close to us. Access to dog friends makes dogs happier, and happier dogs make for better human companions.

Can our dogs' social needs be met through dog parks or dog daycare? For some dogs—the confident extroverts—perhaps, but others are more shy, and, as they age, many dogs lose interest in the company of exuberant youngsters. There also exist dogs who don't get along well with other dogs but who can be friends with a special someone.

Human children and wild animals get to choose their best friends; sadly, most dogs do not. We may try to choose for them, but dogs' preferences for other dogs are highly idiosyncratic and often difficult to predict. Instead, we can attempt to expose our dogs to many other dogs when they are young, and if we pay careful attention, we will notice which ones they like best. When such preferences are mutual, opportunities for prolonged canine friendships arise, and we should make the most of them. Who knows—we might make some new friends along the way, too. 



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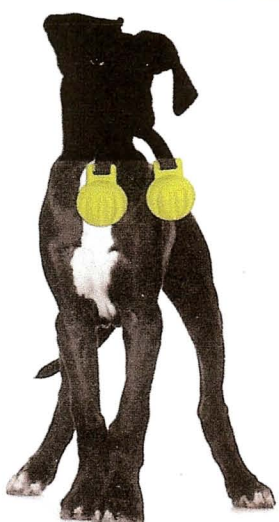
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